

A CHANCE TO RIDE

Introducing Young Adults with Autism to Independent Travel



Supported with funding from:



AUTISM SPEAKS
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Prepared by:

THE
KENNEDY  **CENTER, Inc.**

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Founded in 1951, The Kennedy Center, Inc. is a 501 (c) 3, non-profit community-based rehabilitation organization offering innovative and comprehensive programs and services to persons with special needs and disabilities, from birth through their senior years. Founder Evelyn Kennedy established The Kennedy Center as a grassroots organization, with a dozen other parents, all of whom had children with special needs and disabilities. Since 1981, The Kennedy Center has sought and consistently achieved the highest accreditation from the CARF International (Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities) standards setting organization, which places it among the top 1% of rehabilitation organizations internationally. The Kennedy Center is one of the most comprehensive rehabilitation facilities in the State of Connecticut. On an annual basis, over 2,000 individuals receive program services through our departments of Rehabilitation Services, Residential Services and Kennedy Industries. These include vocational, educational, therapeutic, social, recreational, and respite services. Our mission is to promote the empowerment of individuals with diverse abilities, disabilities and experiences toward optimal participation and inclusion in the community.

The Autism Project, created in 2006, seeks to address the needs of children ages three to twenty-one with an autism spectrum diagnosis and their families through a variety of innovative services. Offerings include social activity groups, respite, recreation and sibling groups, behavioral services, family support, workshops and trainings as well as information and referrals. The Autism Project creates unique partnerships with families to provide flexible and individualized services that meet both the family and child's strengths and needs.

The Travel Training Program at The Kennedy Center, founded in 1991, provides one-to-one instruction to seniors and people with disabilities other than blindness anywhere in Connecticut. The program also provides extensive training to transit operators, human services workers as well as transit districts seeking to set up travel training programs nationwide.

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The Kennedy Center is indebted to all who contributed and helped facilitate this project and to Autism Speaks for recognizing the need to develop a curriculum and tools for community travel specific to students with autism. A special thank you to the teachers and schools who partnered with The Kennedy Center to develop, field test, and refine the curriculum and teaching tools. These include Connecticut students and teachers from Stratford's STRIVE Program, Hamden's High School Transition Academy, Meriden's Maloney High School, Bridgeport's Bassick High School, New Haven's Gateway Community College's Step Forward Program, Wethersfield's High School Transition Program, and Stratford's Access Independence.

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The Kennedy Center hopes this replicable curriculum has a positive impact on students, educators, and trainers in many different settings across the country. We also hope it inspires the user to create materials relevant to their own communities and share them with others. Education sparks change and our hope is that this curriculum enables many students with ASD to achieve the goal of traveling safely and independently and expand their horizons for vocational, residential or social reasons.

Table of Contents

A Chance to Ride

Introducing Young Adults with Autism to Independent Travel

Introduction: A Chance to Ride: Introducing Young Adults with Autism to Independent Travel

A. Introducing Young Adults with Autism to Independent Travel	1-2
B. Family Involvement in Travel Training	3-4
C. Working with Students with ASD	5-6
D. Using this Curriculum	7
E. A Chance to Ride Prescreening Assessment begins at:	8

Lesson 1: Interacting with Individuals in the Community

A. Introduction	I-II
B. Lesson Levels I, II, & III	1-7
C. Lesson Materials begin at:	8

Lesson 2: Signs and Traffic Symbols

A. Introduction	I-II
B. Lesson Levels I, II, & III	1-5
C. Lesson Materials begin at:	6

Lesson 3: Pedestrian Safety and Awareness of Surroundings

A. Introduction	I-II
B. Lesson Levels I, II, & III	1-5
C. Lesson Materials begin at:	6

Lesson 4: Preparing for Your Trip

A. Introduction	I-IV
B. Lesson Levels I, II, & III	1-10
C. Lesson Materials begin at:	11

Lesson 5: Travel Practice

A. Introduction	I
B. Lesson Levels I, II, & III	1-5
C. Lesson Materials begin at:	6

Lesson 6: Expect the Unexpected: Dealing with the “What Ifs”

A. Introduction	I-III
B. Lesson Level III	1-2
C. Lesson Materials begin at:	3

Individualized Travel Training

A. Individualized Travel Training	1-3
B. Materials begin at:	4

A Chance to Ride: Resources and Credits

A. Bibliography	1-2
B. Photo Credits	3-4

Table of Contents (Continued)

A Chance to Ride

Introducing Young Adults with Autism to Independent Travel

PowerPoints and Videos

1. PowerPoint: Lesson 1 Levels II & III Transit and Community Etiquette
2. PowerPoint: Lesson 2 Level I Looking for Signs
3. PowerPoint: Lesson 2 Level II Street Signs & Traffic Symbols
4. PowerPoint and Video Clip: Lesson 3 Level I Using a Crosswalk Light
5. PowerPoint: Lesson 3 Level II Using a Crosswalk Light
6. Video: Lesson 3 Level II Pedestrian Safety: <http://youtu.be/iSgIPfIllyU>
7. PowerPoint: Lesson 4 Levels I, II & III Virtual Bus Tour
8. PowerPoint: Lesson 4 Level III How to Read a Bus Schedule

A Chance to Ride

Introducing Young Adults with Autism to Independent Travel

The Kennedy Center, Inc., based in Trumbull, Connecticut, has been providing travel training to people with disabilities since 1991. The program has evolved considerably since its inception and now serves people with disabilities, seniors, and transitional high school students throughout the State of Connecticut.

Our core travel training curriculum was designed to be adapted to serve individuals with any type of disability or unique learning style. The curriculum is based on a set of skills necessary for independent travel (e.g., leaving home on time, recognizing landmarks, signaling for a stop, exiting a transit vehicle). Then based on the individual's skill set, the curriculum is customized into a field based teaching regimen.



Under a program expansion in 2006, we began to work more intensively with transitional high school students. We found that more and more individuals referred for services among our younger trainees had autism spectrum disorders (ASD). Though our existing travel training curriculum served many young adults on the spectrum well, we found that our travel trainers were often developing new strategies and making customized tools to help young adults with an ASD achieve independent travel. Pictures of buses and trains, landmarks, and other key trip information were often employed to help the new traveler remember the steps and sequences of a trip. A myriad of “travel readiness” skills, such as handling unexpected detours in bus routes or schedule changes and interacting appropriately with fellow travelers and transit workers were also being taught to this population. We began developing more tools, many of them picture based.

The classroom training is a very important component, usually a prelude to travel training in the field on actual buses and trains. The training program introduces and reinforces key concepts essential to independent travel on public transportation. These concepts include taking responsibility for one's own safety; planning in advance and carrying appropriate items (watch, cell phone, bus fare, weather gear, etc.); interacting safely with other community members; walking and crossing streets safely; seeking help if needed; and using maps, schedules, and technology to plan trips. Classroom teaching of those concepts prepares the individual with ASD, which should help to make the first few field experiences on public transportation less overwhelming. Skills will have been practiced in advance. Sights and sounds that will be experienced will have already been previewed in the comfort and familiarity of the classroom.

As our network of transitional high school classrooms grew, we formed solid working relationships with several high school programs developed specifically for students with autism. The teachers at these schools were committed to making independent travel on public transportation a component of the life skills they were teaching their students. Again, materials were developed to teach independent travel for this population.

When the opportunity became available for funding from Autism Speaks through a community services grant, we “threw our hat in the ring”. We proposed to develop a more thorough, formalized curriculum to assess the potential of young adults on the spectrum to travel independently with three categories of readiness.

A few words of caution are in order. Just like the general population of individuals with disabilities, not all individuals with ASD are appropriate for independent travel on public transportation. Some may take years to learn the essential pre-travel training readiness skills such as street crossing or asking for help if lost. Some learners will be expert at skills such as map and schedule reading but may need extensive practice in interacting appropriately with strangers. Classroom lessons will bear repeating multiple times; others may need to repeat material from the more beginner lessons for years before developing the level of independence required for successful independent travel on public transportation.

The curriculum and supporting tools herein are designed for special education teachers, parents, independent living coaches and counselors, and other support people who wish to help a young person with ASD gain travel skills. These materials will be helpful and effective for some learners, but others may need additional tools beyond what is found here. Users of this curriculum are encouraged to customize the sample materials to suit their local transit system and surrounding environment. The more pictures, maps, timetables, and other tools that can be included from the local transit system, the more the individual will gain familiarity with his or her own travel environment.

The pre-screening assessment is designed to group individuals into one of three categories on each skill required for “travel training readiness.” Level I, the beginner level, focuses on basic skills such as identifying emergency workers and potential safety hazards. Level II, or the middle level, builds upon the Level I skills and introduces concepts such as “safer” and “unsafe” strangers, reading street signs, and crossing streets safely. The Level III skills are for students who have been deemed “ready for travel training,” and cover more advanced concepts such as trip planning and using maps and schedules

We hope you find the curriculum helpful and we hope you will customize and interchange the materials in ways that work for your unique learners. And we wish you all safe travels.



Family Involvement in Travel Training

INFORMATION MEETINGS

Involving family members in every step of the travel training process is paramount to the success of the travel training initiative. Whether it is for a group or an individual, the first step is to introduce family members to the process and methodology of teaching independent community travel. Parents and/or guardians can be invited to classroom meetings with the transit educator and teacher. The intention of these meetings is to have family members learn what skills will be taught and have a chance to ask questions, address concerns and find out how to best partner with the trainer before, during and after travel training.

DECIDING READINESS FOR TRAVEL TRAINING (MOVING TO LEVEL III)

The student's team must have an understanding of where the student is cognitively, socially, and emotionally before starting travel training. In addition to the information obtained in the teacher and parent pre-screening assessment, other documents such as current and past IEPs and psychological assessments shed light on prerequisite skills for travel training. Additionally, student observation in the field to assess social, safety and pedestrian skills can be helpful in determining readiness.

Some students express a desire to learn public transit. Motivation to learn is often a key indicator of future travel training success. Parents may notice other signs of readiness such as the ability to master new tasks or an interest in more independence.

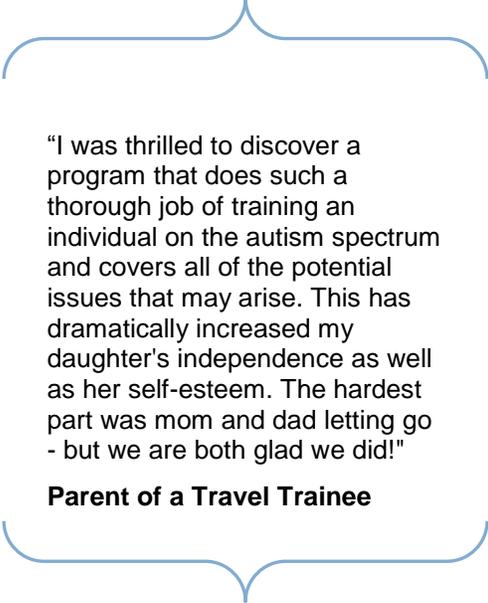
The major advantage of one-to-one training is that the program can be tailored to totally fit the needs of the individual student.

REASSURING THE PARENT ABOUT TRAVEL TRAINING

Independent travel for a student with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a big step and just like any transition may involve a multitude of mixed feelings for family members. Often feelings of one member of the family differ from another. It is important to understand that these feelings are common and natural and to discuss them with a travel trainer. Reassure everyone that the number one priority of travel training programs is safety. All well-developed programs build in preventive measures to reduce safety risks and also teach skills to deal with emergencies.

Ways to reassure the family member about the travel training include:

- ❖ If the family member has never ridden the bus before, suggest they give it a try! Buses tend to be clean, comfortable, and convenient and transit staff helpful.



"I was thrilled to discover a program that does such a thorough job of training an individual on the autism spectrum and covers all of the potential issues that may arise. This has dramatically increased my daughter's independence as well as her self-esteem. The hardest part was mom and dad letting go - but we are both glad we did!"

Parent of a Travel Trainee

- ❖ Have the travel trainer take the family member out on the exact route at the exact time the student will travel. This will give them a chance to experience what their child will experience. They may be able to enlighten the trainer about things their child is likely to react to both negatively and positively.
- ❖ Have the family member talk to others who have gone through the travel training program. Other parents likely share similar concerns and emotions at the beginning of travel training. If you need references, the trainer should be able to supply them.
- ❖ Talk to students with ASD who have been travel trained and now use public transit independently.

"By the time our child took that first 'solo' trip on the public bus, we were confident that the independent travel would be successful, thanks to The Kennedy Center Travel Training Program. The trainer thoroughly covered the basics of public transportation—where to wait, how to pay the fare, when to signal your stop—as well as important lessons about being aware of your surroundings before, during and after the bus ride."

Parent of a Travel Trainee

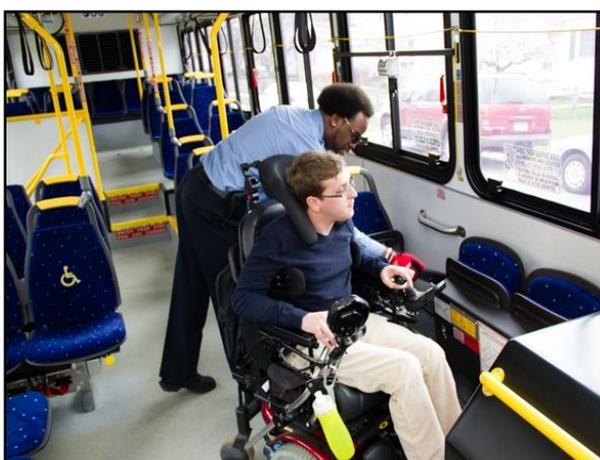
STARTING OUT

When working with the student and family, the trainer will consider factors such as: length of trip; number of transfers; hours of service; amount of walking; neighborhood safety. Parents should request a copy of the route and the schedule and any pertinent telephone numbers or contact names.

Once training has begun, parents can (and should!) receive daily feedback and then reinforce the techniques taught in travel training.

A typical travel training sequence incorporates the basic principles of individualized instruction, teaching in a real environment, and graduated lesson sequence. The particular sequence, level of complexity, and approach may differ for all individuals but basic competencies need to be mastered by all trainees for safe independent travel.

Once the student graduates as an independent traveler, one of the most critical aspects is follow-up. Parents can be actively involved by “touching base” through a call or text message with the new traveler after he or she arrives at his destination. Also, if parents have any concerns, they should contact the travel trainer who will be available for re-training if anything has changed.



Working with Students with ASD



The term “Autism Spectrum Disorder” (ASD) refers to a group of complex neurological developmental disabilities. It is believed to be a lifelong disorder with no definitive cause or cure (Volkmar, 2004). Many individuals with ASD experience challenges within areas of communication, social interaction, organization, flexibility, self-regulation, problem solving and self-advocacy. For someone on the autism spectrum, smells, noise and/or temperature may be overwhelming. Handling a change in routine, a bus or train running late or substitute drivers may also pose a challenge. It is crucial to identify the myriad and varied individual preferences during the initial assessment phase

to ensure the most success for an individual.

Travel opens up opportunities for all people in a community, including those with ASD. Travel, however, may pose certain frustrations and challenges for individuals with ASD. With advanced preparation and training, individuals with ASD and their families can enjoy a more satisfying experience along with increased opportunities to access work and other leisure activities.

Travel training seeks to teach individuals specific skills to travel safely and independently, most often by using fixed route transportation. Modes of transportation may pose issues for individuals with ASD who experience increased anxiety over enclosed spaces like trains or buses, being too close to others in crowded modes of transit or becoming overwhelmed by loud transit noises. However, in most cases, these sensitivities can be accommodated with preparation and individualized trip planning.

The format for *A Chance to Ride* curriculum focuses on information and research related to best practices in educating individuals with ASD. All individuals with ASD are unique and have their own characteristics, strengths and challenges. ASD can impact many areas of functioning for individuals or just a few. Due to the nature of these variations within ASD, there is no single method of instruction that will be successful for all individuals. However, a multi-modal approach and use of multiple methods of instruction will be needed to successfully meet the needs of each individual trained (National Autism Center (NAC), 2009 and Simpson, 2005). To reach the most successful training outcomes, a variety of methods are incorporated into this curriculum.

Readiness for independent travel pre-screening assessment and other measures were developed around an individual's strengths, needs, characteristics, individual and family values, preferred learning styles and capacity to safely implement travel techniques demonstrated in real-life, community situations. This feature of instruction within the community is crucial, especially for individuals with ASD as generalization of a new skill across settings can pose a challenge. Since independent travel will be used by individuals in the community, that is where it needs to be initially observed, assessed and then later taught. Do not assume that because a travel skill is observed or used in one setting that its use will generalize and be present in all settings. Community based instruction is a predictor of positive post-school outcomes for individuals with ASD.

This curriculum features small group instruction with a final individualized travel program from point of origin to final destination. The curriculum relies heavily on use of visuals, suggested repetition of materials across ability levels and age groups, social stories and implementation of these functional travel skills in real-life settings. One hallmark of the curriculum is to have students who are completing Level III of the curriculum who are preparing to engage in individualized travel training complete self-assessments for some lessons where provided to increase self-awareness of personal strengths and areas for continued growth.

Most successful outcomes are seen for those individuals who are internally motivated and want to travel independently and for those with parent, guardian or family support.



Using this Curriculum

The pre-screening assessment tool helps to identify which level of instruction will be most applicable to your student. It will indicate where to start, specific content areas and which level of instruction students must master before moving on to the next.

This informal assessment focuses on key questions related to independent travel. It is for the parent and/or teacher to fill out – someone who knows the student well. For a student with many “nevers”, it may be determined that he or she is not ready for travel training. Certain skill areas were deemed essential for safe and successful independent travel. An additional comment section is provided for highlighting individual differences that may prove challenging for someone with ASD. It also allows for the opportunity to expand or clarify information that cannot be clearly addressed within the assessment parameters. For a student who is ready, this pre-screening helps to highlight areas of weakness as well as strength. This information is an essential step for successful training.

LEVEL OF INSTRUCTION/SELECTING THE LESSON

Level I Red: Students may begin at this level as a method of pre-exposing them to the idea of travel training years before they begin the actual instruction and practice. This level utilizes reduced language and increased use of visual supports, prompts and social stories.

Level II Yellow: This level employs a combination of visual supports, language and social stories for modeling. Students at this level may need some additional instruction and frequently have no independent travel experience.

Level III Green: Students at this level may need minimal review and instruction in core areas of independent travel. Some students or individuals may be traveling on their own occasionally or may be returning to independent travel after a break. Visual supports are still utilized as well as cue cards for reinforcing and generalizing sequencing of core travel processes.

ORDER OF LESSONS

Some curriculum areas (a lesson and a trip) can be combined into one instructional session while other lessons can be broken down into as many sessions as appropriate for the individual or group. The order of the lessons is here for teachers to follow but can vary according to the needs of the individual or group.

For example, Lesson 4 Preparing for Your Trip can be followed immediately by Lesson 5 Travel Practice. Lesson 4 Schedule Reading (Optional) and Lesson 1 Interacting with Individuals in the Community can also be completed before Lesson 5 Travel Practice. Lesson 2 Signs & Traffic Symbols can be easily divided into separate sections for instruction.

**A Chance to Ride
Pre-screening Assessment**

Pre-Screening Assessment

Individual's Name: _____ Date: _____

Person completing the form: _____

Relationship to individual: _____

How often do the following statements take place for the individual? Circle one answer per question.

	Never	Sometimes	Very Often	COMMENT
1. Is able to make decisions on own.	0	1	2	
2. Can focus and concentrate.	0	1	2	
3. Can follow multi-step directions.	0	1	2	
4. Can handle unexpected situations.	0	1	2	
5. Can problem-solve.	0	1	2	
6. Can communicate his/her needs (verbally or non-verbally).	0	1	2	
7. Can accept feedback.	0	1	2	
8. Understands street safety.	0	1	2	
9. Uses street safety rules.	0	1	2	
10. Understands stranger awareness.	0	1	2	
11. Uses stranger awareness rules.	0	1	2	
12. Knows personal information.	0	1	2	
13. Will share personal information with emergency workers and appropriate people.	0	1	2	
14. Can identify emergency or transit workers.	0	1	2	
15. Handles personal belongings carefully in public.	0	1	2	
16. Recognizes needing help.	0	1	2	
17. Will take action to get help from an appropriate source.	0	1	2	
18. Is able to decline help politely.	0	1	2	
19. Spends time independent of direct supervision at home and in the community.				

Pre-Screening Assessment (continued)

	Never	Sometimes	Very Often	Comment
20. Is aware of surroundings.	0	1	2	
21. Can identify objects/place markers that remain stable or fixed in the environment.	0	1	2	
22. Recognizes dangerous situations and obstacles.	0	1	2	
23. Takes action to avoid/deal with dangerous situations and obstacles.	0	1	2	
24. Is aware of their own sensory needs (for example, standing too close to others makes them uncomfortable or loud noises can cause anxiety).	0	1	2	
25. Uses strategies to help with sensory needs.	0	1	2	
26. Maintains socially expected behavior when in the community.	0	1	2	
27. Uses coping skills to manage stress.	0	1	2	
28. Wants to travel independently.	0	1	2	
29. Is willing to learn new skills.	0	1	2	
COLUMN TOTAL:				
TOTAL SCORE (add column totals):				

Questions/Comments:

Total Score:

Score of 0-28: Travel Training not applicable at this time. Extended instruction recommended with focus on safety skills.

Score of 29-43: Extra instruction suggested prior to beginning Travel Training. Repetition, practice, review and prompting visuals may be helpful to aid learning.

Score of 44-58: The student may be **Travel Training Ready**.

Highlighted questions 6, 16 and 23 if "never" checked indicates an individual may not be ready for Travel Training.